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SUBJECT: TURKISH TRUCKING ASSOCIATION URGES HALT TO WORK
WITH USG IN IRAQ

REF: ANKARA 4340

Summary

1. (sbu) Immediately following the August 2 murder of Murat Yuce, a former Turkish trucker who had been held hostage in Iraq, Turkey's largest transporters' association released a statement calling on its members to halt work on all U.S. military contracts in Iraq. The non-binding statement may have led to the subsequent August 5 release of two other Turkish truckers held hostage in Iraq, but also prompted criticism from such groups as a rival transporters' association and Turkey's major exporters' association, which argued that Turkish companies must be free to play a role in Iraq's future. Both transporters' associations tell us privately, however, that, despite the risk, Turkish companies will continue to seek more business in Iraq. End Summary.

Turkish Truckers Association "Abandons" USG Contracts

2. (sbu) Murat Yuce, a plumber employed by the Turkish firm Bilintur to handle laundry services at one of the U.S. military facilities in Iraq, was taken hostage and murdered on August 2 (reftel). Until a few months ago, however, Yuce was a trucker for the Turkish firm Oztur. Immediately following the internet broadcast of his murder, the International Transporters' Association (ITA), which purports to represent over 90 percent of Turkish transportation companies, issued a statement calling on its members to halt work on all U.S. military contracts in Iraq. (Note: Following the statement, two other Turkish drivers for Oztur were released in Iraq on August 5. End Note.) Despite the declarative language of the statement (full text in para 7), ITA Chairman Cahit Soysal told poloff on August 5 that the decision was approved by only a majority of ITA's 19 board members and has no binding authority on ITA's 900 plus member companies. Soysal began by assuring poloff that ITA does not see the U.S. as an "enemy." The August 2 statement, Soysal argued, is the product of many months of concern about the security situation for member employees in Iraq. ITA said they have conveyed these concerns and specific suggestions to improve the situation to Turkish, Iraqi, and USG officials (including to Ambassador Bremmer during a February 2004 meeting in Baghdad with a Turkish commercial delegation).

3. (sbu) Poloff remarked that the U.S. shares ITA's concerns about the security situation. Soysal conceded that the U.S. has taken some measures, but went on to argue that shortcomings in these arrangements vitiate their effectiveness. Even where there are convoys, he said, they don't wait for trucks that have technical problems (even flat tires) and they speed up whenever they come under fire, sometimes leaving trucks behind. Additionally, the convoys are provided only to Mosul and not back to the border -- would-be terrorists need only note which trucks are escorted on the way to Mosul and then target them on the way back. Soysal said that ITA does not hold the U.S. responsible for the security situation and added that ITA is willing to work with all of the relevant authorities to invest in measures that can improve the situation. Additionally, Soysal assured poloff that ITA is not encouraging its member companies to cancel contracts with the U.S. military. "The statement was a political, public-relations message," Soysal admitted. Poloff noted that the USG is worried that the statement, by seeming to respond to terrorist demands, may ultimately have a detrimental effect on the personal security of Turks and other foreigners in Iraq. Soysal said that, with sufficient cover (i.e., additional security measures), ITA would be eager to rescind the statement.

Rival Groups Denounce Statement as Irresponsible Posturing

4. (sbu) While the ITA statement elicited some public support (particularly from groups that are generally opposed to the U.S. presence in Iraq), a number of business associations were openly critical. The Chairman of the Turkish Exporters' Assembly, for example, said that "Neither the Turkish truckers nor the exporters have the luxury to say that 'I don't want to play here.'" Saffet Ulusoy, Chairman of ITA's principal rival transporters' association, the Ro-Ro Vessel

Operators and Combined Transporters' Association (RODER), said that, "ITA does not have the authority or the right to take such a decision. Only the government can take such a decision." Cumhuri Atilgan, the General Manager of RODER (which claims to represent over 60 percent of Turkish transport companies) told poloff on August 6 that RODER also has security concerns but that many of its members had criticized the ITA statement as "political posturing" that is detrimental to their business and to the security of their truckers in Iraq. (Note: Ulusoy, formerly ITA Chairman, formed RODER when he lost reelection 2 years ago. ITA and RODER share a number of members, but do not see eye to eye on most issues. End Note).

Improving Security in Iraq?

15. (sbu) Despite their security concerns and the perceived risks of working in Iraq, both ITA and RODER assured poloff that their members were committed to pursuing such business. Following the liberation of Iraq last year, trade between Turkey and Iraq has risen dramatically. According to recently released figures from the Turkish Exporters' Assembly, trade with Iraq in 2003 was over USD 1 billion and reached almost USD 800 million in the last 7 months. In order to address their own security concerns, both ITA and RODER told poloff that they are developing projects to construct a warehouse and trans-shipment center in northern Iraq where Turkish trucks can transfer their cargo to Iraqi trucks. Both said that they were willing to invest their own money, that they had already raised the idea with the Turkish MFA and Ministry of Transportation, and that they are planning to send delegations to Iraq to explore possibilities on the ground. Both asked for U.S. support. Both organizations also lamented the failure to implement earlier proposals that Turkish trucks be given fake or temporary Iraqi license plates to reduce the likelihood that they would be targeted by terrorists.

Comment

16. (sbu) The ITA statement appears to have been a political effort to insulate Turkish truckers from association with the USG and to goad authorities into addressing their long-held security concerns. Political and personal differences between ITA and RODER will probably prevent any cooperation between the two organizations on efforts to improve the security situation for their companies. Regardless of the inherent risks and the position of their associations, however, Turkish transportation companies and exporters are likely to continue to pursue lucrative business contracts in Iraq.

ITA August 2 Statement

17. (u) International Transporter's Association supports the development of political and trade relations between Turkey and Iraq. However, it has observed that security and stability in Iraq can not be maintained yet. Within the framework of current developments, the ITA decided to stop the transport of cargo which belong to the American troops in Iraq as of August 2, 2004.

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